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What did the Allies know and when did they know it?

THE UNTOLD STORY OF WORLD WAR II

BY WALTER LAQUEUR

THE PUBLICATION of a book is seldom a political event. It is rarer still that the appearance of one book requires the rewriting of several thousands of others. Yet such is the case with the second volume of the *Official History of British Intelligence in the Second World War*, published last month in London by Her Majesty's Stationery Office. It covers the crucial period from Hitler's invasion of Russia to the summer of 1943, a time when the outcome of World War II still hung in the balance.

Ever since the news of the "Ultra Secret" first became known in 1973, students of contemporary history have suspected that a wholesale revision of assumptions and conclusions about World War II would have to be undertaken. For if it was indeed true that Britain and America had intercepted and deciphered much of the enemy's wireless telegraphy throughout most of the war, there would be no escaping a reexamination of almost all the important decisions made by Western statesmen and generals. The matter of who knew what and when obviously would be of paramount importance.

But even after the disclosure of the Ultra Secret, there remained the vital question of how far the historical revision would have to go. According to one school of thought, there was a danger of exaggerating the importance of Ultra, and also of "Magic," the code word given to American intelligence derived from decoding Japanese signals. Wars are decided by superior military power, this school holds, not by intelligence. David Kahn, author of *The Codebreakers* (New American Library), and *Hitler's Spies* (Macmillan), was right when he wrote (albeit before the whole extent of Ultra became known) that "even if we had the worst intelligence and they had the best, we would still have defeated them." Even the most important information has no operational value at all unless it reaches the right people at the right time: Pearl Harbor was an obvious example of some of the things that can go wrong. Nor was it the case that the Allies knew everything about German intentions, and the Germans nothing about those of the Allies. The *Official History* shows quite clearly that although the code of the German air force was broken for most of the war—as was, incidentally, that of the *Abwehr*, the German foreign intelligence service—those of the navy and the army were available only intermittently, and frequently with delay. The Gestapo code, for reasons not altogether clear, was never broken. The Allies fequently had unrivaled strategic intelligence, but the Germans were much better, up to 1943, in operational intelligence in the field. Thus the British, for instance, would intercept Hitler's instructions to General Rommel to attack or to retreat during the North African campaign. But they had no way of knowing whether Rommel would obey or would pretend (as he occasionally did) that the orders had reached him too late. There still were unpleasant surprises for the British and later for the American forces in North Africa. It is no doubt true, as the authors say, that the Allied forces in North Africa were supplied with more information about more aspects of enemy operations than any forces had ever enjoyed in any war. But they still did not know everything, and once there was room for doubt, hesitation followed. Action was delayed—or sometimes precipitate action taken—according to the

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